



# Two Behavior Management Systems, One Classroom: Can Elementary Students Adapt?

by *Mike F. Desiderio and Cathy Mullennix*

## *Abstract*

*After going through Assertive Discipline training, a student teacher entered her new first-grade class. The mentor classroom teacher did not use Assertive Discipline, but gave permission for the student teacher to use this management system. After teaching students her rules, rewards, and negative consequences—and appropriately implementing Assertive Discipline—it was found that students responded to both the student teacher and the regular classroom teacher in the appropriate ways each expected.*

Behavior management of students in schools is a concern that is on the minds of many Americans today. In the 2001, 2002, and 2003 Gallup polls on the general public's attitude toward schools, sponsored by Phi Delta Kappa, respondents indicated that lack of discipline is one of the top two problems faced by public schools in their communities (Rose and Gallup 2001; 2002; 2003). Charles (2002, 4) stated, "In the overwhelming majority of the polls conducted so far, discipline has been listed as a top problem."

Preservice teachers at Southeastern Oklahoma State University are required to take EDUC 4443 Classroom and Behavior Management, due in part to universal concerns about student discipline. This course is offered in two ways: one evening a week for 16 weeks or in a four-week block just prior to the 12-week student teaching experience. Regardless of the format, the curriculum for preservice teachers is the same: discussion of administrative teaching duties, room arrangements, explanation of various management styles, and extensive training in assertive discipline.

Assertive Discipline is a behavior management system that emphasizes positive reinforcement as the key to students making appropriate choices regarding classroom

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behavior. Teachers wishing to implement Assertive Discipline successfully must adopt the position that they care enough about teaching and learning in their classroom that they will not allow anyone to interfere with this process, not even the students (Canter and Canter 2001).

Since Assertive Discipline was introduced in 1976, more than 1.5 million teachers have attended workshops on this discipline style (Canter and Canter 2001). Research has been conducted on the use of Assertive Discipline in both classroom and school settings. Though Assertive Discipline has its detractors, many studies (Allen 1983; Bauer 1982; Ferguson and Houghton 1992; Garrett 1988; Moore 1989; Swinson and Cording 2002; Terrell 1984; Toibin-Mendoza 1988; Ward 1983) indicated that, when appropriately implemented and used, Assertive Discipline does produce positive results. For example, Assertive Discipline is an effective tool in reducing the number of incidences of inappropriate and disruptive student behavior in the classroom and school settings. Anderson (1989), Evans (1991), and McCallum (1989) indicated that teacher attitudes toward student discipline were affected positively through their use of Assertive Discipline. Preservice teachers, when trained in Assertive Discipline, reported being better prepared and more confident in dealing with students' inappropriate and disruptive behaviors in the classroom (Barrett and Curtis 1986; Dickman 1991; Smith 1983).

Research on Assertive Discipline and student teachers' perceptions parallels the findings at Southeastern Oklahoma State University. Each semester, after completing student teaching, preservice teachers fill out a teacher education program evaluation. One question asked is: "What happened in the classroom for which you did not feel prepared?" After the spring 1999 semester, 50 percent of the responding preservice teachers (61 of 123) indicated they were not prepared for student discipline issues. After the spring 2003 semester, only 19 percent of the responding preservice teachers (12 of 62) indicated they were not prepared for student discipline issues. One reason many preservice teachers gave for this improvement in their perceptions was their Assertive Discipline training.

### ***Study's Focus***

Each semester, mentor teachers are brought to campus for three hours of training before hosting student teachers in their classrooms. New mentor teachers are given an additional two hours of training. Several teachers each semester expressed concern about classroom management and the preservice teacher in their classroom. Most concerns centered on the preservice teacher implementing a different discipline management program than they used. Several mentor teachers expressed concern that young students would become confused if the established discipline management system was changed to fit the needs of the preservice teacher during the 12-week experience. Thus, this investigation centered on: "Will young students be able to adapt to two different teachers with different behavior management styles?"

### ***Methodology***

Case studies often are used to investigate phenomena in school settings. Merriam (1998, 29) told us that "case studies can be characterized as being particularistic, descriptive,

and heuristic." Shaw (1978, 2) stated that case studies "concentrate attention on the way particular groups of people confront specific problems, taking a holistic view of the situation. They are problem-centered, small scale, entrepreneurial endeavors." Stake (1981, 47) stated, "Insights into how things get to be the way they are can be expected to result from case studies." Thus, it was determined that a case study would allow for a deeper understanding of what transpired in a classroom.

To investigate the validity of teacher concerns about implementing the Assertive Discipline model into classrooms not presently using this behavior management system, a case study was developed in 2003. Katherine Johnston (a pseudonym), a student teacher assigned to a first-grade classroom of 18 students at a rural elementary school, was the subject of this study. A demographic breakdown of the students in Katherine's assigned classroom showed that there were 10 male and eight female students; 17 students of European-American descent and one male student of Mexican-American descent; three learning-disabled students (two males and one female); four students in the federal free lunch program; and two students who were retained from the previous school year.

With permission from the building principal and the mentor teacher, Katherine implemented Assertive Discipline in the classroom. Multiple sources of data were gathered to observe what transpired in the classroom throughout the student teaching experience and beyond. Through written reflection papers, Katherine documented her use of Assertive Discipline and students' responses to this behavior management program. The mentor teacher completed four separate evaluations of Katherine during the 12-week experience. The mentor teacher also responded to e-mail questions posed after the end of the school year. A researcher, trained in teacher evaluation, observed student behaviors while the preservice teacher and her mentor taught class on five separate occasions. The use of these multiple points of view (sources of data) allowed for the "development of converging lines of inquiry, a process of triangulation" (Yin 1994, 91).

### ***Katherine's Reflections***

Katherine began her student teaching experience with 15 hours of observation. During this time, she learned about the 18 children and their classroom behaviors. She also learned about the management style of her mentor teacher. Katherine described her mentor, Mrs. Jones (a pseudonym), as "a wonderful mentor" and "a remarkable teacher" consistent in "her temperament, her teaching quality, and her devotion to students." One area in which Katherine and her mentor differed was in classroom management. Katherine realized that as a novice teacher she needed a more structured classroom environment than Mrs. Jones, who had more than 20 years of teaching experience. To obtain this structured environment, Katherine designed an Assertive Discipline behavior management plan (Figure 1) which was approved by the building principal and Mrs. Jones. This plan adopted the existing classroom rules of the mentor teacher, and added new rewards, corrective actions, and classroom procedures.

## **Figure 1: Katherine's Assertive Discipline Plan**

### **Rules**

1. Listen carefully.
2. Follow directions.
3. Work quietly. Do not disturb others who are working.
4. Respect others. Be kind with your words and actions.
5. Respect school and personal property.
6. Work and play safely.

### **Discipline Plan**

1. Warning
2. Time out
3. 5 minutes out of recess
4. Contact parents
5. Send to counselor (requested by the principal)
6. Send to principal

### **Reward System**

1. Praise
2. Stickers/stamps
3. Positive note to parents
4. Trip to surprise bowl

### **Class-wide Reward System**

The class has a chance to receive 25 tally marks each day. At the end of the day, if students have earned all 25, they each get a small reward, such as a special sticker or a small piece of candy. If they earn their rewards every day of the week, on Fridays, they receive a big reward, which varies. Cupcakes, Popsicles™, extra recess time, etc. are possibilities.

### **Class Procedures**

- Raising hand and waiting to be acknowledged before answering
- Quieting the class by ringing a bell
- Lining up by groups

The class is split into five groups. Each has a group name based on animal groups: mammals, insects, amphibians, birds, reptiles. The students don't always get to have science, so using these groupings is a starting point for integrating science into the rest of the day.

- Having a class helper each day. The helper is selected by going down the list of students. Selection is not dependent on behavior.

After designing the management plan, Katherine created a lesson to teach the plan to her students. Several of the procedures, such as hand-raising, were reviewed with the students several times each week throughout the 12-week experience.

Katherine revised her class-wide reward system, making it easier for students to earn rewards. She lowered the number of tally marks the class needed to earn from 25 to 10. She also changed the daily rewards needed by the class to earn the big reward from the full week to five consecutive days. Katherine explained, "This will stop them from feeling like there is no point if they mess up on Monday with no way to earn their reward for Friday." Describing the students' response to the class-wide reward system and this change, Katherine wrote:

*"The kids absolutely loved it, and they had a remarkable understanding when they didn't get their points. I told them that it wasn't a matter of me not giving them the points, but a matter of them not earning them that day. As soon as I said that, they (the students) were fine with it. They knew that there was no argument because I put the power in their hands, and they either made good decisions or poor ones. They knew I would not talk about it the next day or hold it over their heads. They've gotten as close as nine points before and not earned that last point. Of course they were disappointed, but they learned that it was not my responsibility to earn the points. Many of them wrote about it in their journals and made comments about how neat they thought it was."*

In the teacher education program at Southeastern Oklahoma State, preservice teachers normally have control over the entire class after the fifth week of student teaching. Until then, they gradually teach different subjects and/or do team teaching with the mentor. Katherine wrote that as she began teaching various subjects, she implemented the appropriate discipline techniques.

*I have written positive notes to individuals, given stamps to children behaving properly, administered special privileges, and given praise on a daily basis. I feel that all of the previously mentioned techniques worked well, but the special privileges, such as passing out papers and writing on the board, seem to be the most effective ways of getting the class to behave well. They are very aware of when I took over the class, and their actions, behaviors, and even postures indicate this awareness.*

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Reflecting on her successful experiences during student teaching, Katherine wrote:

*"I have learned that Assertive Discipline is very effective when used consistently.*

*...*

*I implemented a new discipline plan, reward system, and class-wide reward with much success. I feel like these were successful for several reasons. First of all, my mentor was completely supportive. Secondly, I was keeping very detailed documentation. And finally, I was constantly checking myself for consistency."*

### **Mentor Teacher**

Mrs. Jones completed four formal evaluations, answered interview questions through e-mail, and spoke with the researcher after each of his observations. Following his February 21 observation of Katherine, the researcher asked Mrs. Jones about the way Katherine was teaching and implementing Assertive Discipline. Mrs. Jones indicated that she was very pleased with Katherine's teaching and use of Assertive Discipline in the classroom. Mrs. Jones related that the previous week Katherine created a lesson and taught students her classroom-management plan. Mrs. Jones further explained that the lesson and use of Assertive Discipline displayed by Katherine during this observation was typical and not done because the researcher was in the classroom.

On February 28, Mrs. Jones turned in her first of four evaluations of Katherine's student teaching. Mrs. Jones stated, "Katherine is doing a great job! She is truly in her element in the classroom." On her second evaluation, completed March 28, Mrs. Jones indicated that Katherine is a positive influence on both student and mentor learning. She related, "My class has really enjoyed her (Katherine) and learned a great deal in the process. She has enlightened me on new concepts." On her third evaluation, completed April 18, Mrs. Jones indicated that Katherine is not only ready to become a professional, but that she had earned her and the students' respect. "I am fully confident that she (Katherine) can perform all of the duties required of a teacher. The class has really gotten attached to her. I and the children will really miss her," she wrote. On the final evaluation, completed May 9, Mrs. Jones wrote, "Katherine will be greatly missed by me and the entire class! Even teachers in other grades have commented on how productive she is! Wow! She will be a positive asset to any school!"

When responding to the e-mail question about Katherine's success with discipline management, Mrs. Jones's response was, "The students responded well to Katherine's behavior system. She was very thorough in explaining why she reinforced the things she did." When asked if the use of Assertive Discipline by Katherine during student teaching interfered with the mentor's management system after she left, Mrs. Jones replied, "Not at all."

### **Researcher**

A researcher visited Katherine's first-grade classroom five times. Three of these visits involved documented observation (scripting) of direct teaching by Katherine (February 21, March 5, and April 9). During the other two visits, the researcher observed Katherine performing administrative functions (grading, recording grades, etc.) and saw her mentor teaching the class (March 26 and April 25).

Documentation from the three observations highlighted two actions that were critical in successfully implementing Assertive Discipline: reminding students of the directions for the lesson and positive reinforcement. When reminding students of the directions, Katherine did this in a positive manner. At the beginning of all three lessons, students were reminded to raise their hands and not call out answers until recognized. Each time Katherine asked a question, students would raise their hands and were thanked for following her directions. When a student did call out an answer, Katherine stated that she could not hear answers that were called out. The student immediately raised his hand. Though that student was not called on for that answer, when he was called on, he was thanked for raising his hand. There was only one observed incidence of a student calling out an answer without being recognized first. Students also were given the direction of taking out their book and turning to a specific page. Katherine immediately began identifying and praising students who had their books out and open to the correct page. Thus, Katherine was not only praising her students, but also giving her directions again and reinforcing desired student behaviors (Canter and Canter 2001).

In one observation, Katherine issued the negative consequence of a "time out" to a female student for inappropriate behavior. What was memorable about this situation was that when the student began working after the time out, Katherine praised the student by showing off her work to the rest of the class.

During the two observations when Mrs. Jones had control over the class, the researcher indicated that students responded to her instruction in a different, yet appropriate manner than when Katherine was the teacher. Mrs. Jones managed her classroom in a less structured fashion than Katherine. Students felt free to call out answers to questions posed by their teacher and even get up and move around the room without asking permission. Though students had more freedom under the direction of Mrs. Jones, they also received less positive reinforcement. Mrs. Jones did not praise her students as often as Katherine; their appropriate behavior was expected, with freedom in the classroom being the reward.

### **Discussion**

Katherine Johnston successfully designed and implemented an Assertive Discipline plan for her first-grade class during student teaching. The study showed that Katherine's use of Assertive Discipline did not interfere with the classroom and behavior management system of her mentor Mrs. Jones. This group of first-grade students was not confused by having two teachers with different discipline management styles. Mrs. Jones stated that she learned concepts that were new to her, an experienced classroom teacher.

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A generalized claim cannot be made from a case study. When reviewing this study, the individual educator must determine whether the results are likely to apply to his or her teaching situation. Lincoln and Guba (1985) called this concept "transferability." It would be difficult to imagine a class of students older than the first graders Katherine taught who could not adjust to a different teacher's management style. After all, isn't this what we ask students to do when we departmentalize classes?

Katherine was an excellent student teacher paired with an excellent mentor. What Katherine learned at the university was reinforced by Mrs. Jones—preparation, implementation, and consistency. Katherine was ready for her classes, with lessons prepared every day. She created a discipline plan and classroom procedures she was willing to enforce. Katherine identified the student behaviors that would allow her to teach and the children to learn. This preparedness was confirmed by the evaluations from the mentor teacher, Katherine's reflections, and the researcher's field notes.

Katherine implemented her discipline plan and procedures. She discussed her plan with Mrs. Jones and the building principal. She taught the discipline plan and procedures to students. She posted her plan for all students to see. Katherine sent the plan home with students so parents knew what was expected of their children. Her discipline plan and procedures were documented in Katherine's reflections and supported by evaluations from the mentor teacher and the researcher's notes.

Katherine consistently enforced her discipline plan, mostly through the use of positive reinforcement. Canter and Canter (2001) stated that positive reinforcement is the key to getting students to respond appropriately to a discipline plan. When students chose to break the rules, Katherine was willing to consistently implement negative consequences, evidence of which was shown through Katherine's reflections and the researcher's notes. More importantly, after a student received a negative consequence, Katherine looked for positive ways to reaffirm that student.

Everyone wants an effective discipline management system in the classroom. Whether a professional educator or student teacher is in charge, he or she must be willing and able to prepare, implement, and consistently enforce a discipline plan. When an educator takes these steps, students will know what is expected of them and be able to adapt to the management and discipline style of either teacher.

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